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AUTHOR Veres, Helen C.
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to (1) identify continuing education needs and barriers to adult participation in New York State (excluding New York City); (2) collect information about adult education services and staff development priorities in programs sponsored by public schools, Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, and two-year state colleges; and (3) utilize obtained information in regional and state planning for program and staff development. A multiple choice questionnaire was developed to obtain information in six major areas: adult background, past participation, obstacles, and preferred participation conditions in continuing education activities, expressed learning interests, and potential for counseling services utilization. The interview sample included 20,486 adults, sixteen years or older and not full-time students. In general, findings indicated that those who saw themselves as needing information and likely to use counseling services included: persons viewing continuing education as a means of obtaining or advancing in the job, the young, the economically disadvantaged, and those who wished to acquire basic educational skills. Adults with lowest incomes and educational attainment were most likely to perceive lack of information as interfering with participation. The highly ranked barrier, tuition costs, indicates attention should be given to problems of financing continuing education. Also, additional efforts might be directed to further identify and discriminate among strategies to reach special adult target groups. (CSS)

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The Adult Learner: Perceptions of Information and Counseling Needs

Helen C. Veres

Institute for Occupational Education

Cornell University

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Throughout the 1970's, adults have been participating in learning activities in ever-increasing numbers. According to a report of adult participation by the National Center for Educational Statistics (1978), continuing education enrollments between 1969 and 1975 showed an increase two and one-half times greater than the increase in the adult population. Educational institutions have generally welcomed these returning adults, particularly since they have been faced with declining enrollments among the traditional aged student population. However, services developed for younger students often do not reflect the changing demands placed upon them by these "non-traditional" students.

The literature related to adult learners and/or counseling services for adults contains several common themes. One is that the adult learner has different or unique problems compared to his/her younger counterpart. This view is based upon research in developmental psychology which states that adulthood consists of several stages, each with its own developmental needs. (Knox, 1977; Erikson, 1959). Hence, the adult returning to education faces problems and obstacles which are unknown or infrequently encountered by younger students. (Roelfs, 1975; Brandenberg, 1974). Another frequently stated theme is that since school and college services were developed for the younger students, they may be neither responsive to adult concerns nor easily assessible to the continuing education learner (Hartwig, 1976). Even when adults seek resources or services in the community, the potential learner may be frustrated in his or her attempt to obtain assistance (Tough, 1971). Other writers stress the need for counselors who are specifically trained to work with adults. This viewpoint often further suggests that preparation for secondary or college counseling is inadequate for work in continuing education settings (Hartwig, 1976).

Such approaches all point to a need for counseling services based upon the special needs of adult learners and staffed by counselors trained to work with adults. However, still other research on adult learning

interests (Cross and Valley, 1974) or participation in continuing education activities (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1978) indicates that adults have a variety of interests as well as a variety of reasons for learning. How can this diversity of needs be met? Do adults want counseling? Will they utilize services if they are provided? What are the perceptions that adults of differing personal characteristics hold about counseling services? Answers to such questions can help in planning services around the expressed needs of present and potential adult learners.

Concern for answers to these and other questions about the learning preferences of adults and the extent to which learner needs were being met led to the development of a comprehensive study under sponsorship of the Division of Continuing Education, New York State Education Department - an effort directed to supplying improved information for continuing education planning. Although the study consists of a three-part data collection effort: 1) the assessment of the continuing education needs of New York State adults, 2) an examination of the delivery system for continuing education in the state, and 3) an assessment of the in-service training needs of continuing education faculty and administrators, this paper focuses upon the study findings which have implications for planning information and counseling services for adults.

Objectives of the Study

The basic objectives of the total study were:

1. To identify the continuing education needs and barriers to participation of adults in New York State (excluding New York City).
2. To collect information concerning the educational services offered to adults in programs sponsored by the public schools, Boards of Cooperative Educational Services and two-year colleges in New York State.
3. To identify the staff development priorities of continuing education administrators and faculties in the public schools, BOCES and two-year colleges in the state.

4. To utilize the information obtained as a basis for regional and state decision-making and planning concerning program development and staff training in continuing education.

Survey Method

In the Fall of 1975, a survey instrument to obtain information from adults about their perceived learning needs was developed and field tested by staff of the Institute for Occupational Education at Cornell University. The instrument was designed to obtain information from adults in personal interviews covering the following major areas.

1. Background information on the adults surveyed
2. Past participation in continuing education activities.
3. Expressed learning interests.
4. Obstacles to participation in continuing education activities.
5. Preferred conditions for participation in continuing education.
6. Potential for utilization of counseling and advising services for adults.

The questions based on each of these areas were constructed in a multiple choice format with answers recorded on a machine-scorable form. The majority of these questions had precoded response categories with responses such as "other" or "don't know" included to provide for answers not specified among the choices. In addition, interviewers could record other comments or special information from the survey participant on an interviewer summary sheet. This method was considered to be the most efficient way of handling the vast amount of survey data while permitting the recording of special circumstances among the very large sample population.

The resulting survey questionnaire was field-tested with adults of various ages and educational backgrounds. It was then subjected to special review by professionals in the field of continuing education. Following the field test and review, the preliminary questionnaire was revised and the final version prepared for administration to survey participants. The length of the average interview was approximately one-half hour.

Since an important objective of the needs assessment study was to obtain data about continuing education needs for local area planning, the survey questionnaire was administered in local communities throughout the state. The State Education Department regional structure (nine regions) was employed to divide the state for purposes of the survey. For each region, a regional manager or survey coordinator was selected to supervise the administration of the survey in that region. These managers were directors of local programs who had evidenced deep interest in the development of continuing education and who possessed leadership and managerial capabilities. The regional managers were aided in the task by other continuing education professionals who made up a regional cabinet. The resulting team was responsible for selection and training of interviewers, distribution and collection of materials, carrying out the sampling plan as well as other administrative duties associated with the survey.

The Sample of Adults

For this survey of continuing education needs, the population of interest was identified by the State Education Department as all persons age 16 or older who were not currently full-time students. The management teams throughout the state were instructed in methods of randomly selecting 700 of the adult residents to be interviewed from each school supervisory district. The total number of interviews were apportioned in clusters of five interviews per neighborhood to facilitate the use of interviewer time and travel. Since the project had special interest in the responses of undereducated adults, interviewers were instructed to use special efforts in their attempts to obtain responses to the questionnaire. In several areas with large non-English speaking populations, the use of bilingual interviewers enabled these residents to be surveyed.

The resulting sample included a total of 20,486 New York State adults, excluding New York City. Consequently, the obtained data reflect a sample

drawn from a population base of 10,342,084 upstate New York residents (1970 Census). Of this total, 5,843,416 persons were age 25 and over (57% of the upstate population) and could be expected to constitute a potential audience for continuing education services.

Counseling and Information

One part of the interview included questions about the perceived information and counseling needs of adults. In spite of efforts made by providers of learning activities to publicize and disseminate information about their offerings, this information does not always reach the adults who require it. Also, many adults who obtain information need further explanation, interpretation or counseling in order to attain their learning goals. Consequently, this section of the interview asked adults if they felt they had enough information about local continuing education activities in their area of interest, the best way for the person to receive information, the helpfulness of counseling in assisting this person to get started in continuing education and the likelihood of the individual consulting a counselor for job-related or financial aid counseling.

Need for Information

The survey findings indicate that 47.0% of the adults interviewed felt that they did not have enough information about continuing education courses in their local communities. Another 41.1% felt they did have sufficient information and 11.5% did not have an opinion about the amount of information available to them. This need for information varied depending upon characteristics of the persons surveyed. For example, individuals with job-related learning interests were slightly above the average (50.4%) in expressing the feeling that they did not have enough information.

A general trend was noted in relation to the age group of respondents and their relative need for information regarding continuing education, as shown in Table 1. The expressed need for information was greatest at the lowest age levels (below 25 years) diminishing as age increased. Within the age group of respondents 55 years and older, retired persons were most likely to say that they had enough information (54.2%) about local educational resources. Since younger adults were more likely to prefer study for job-related reasons, this trend probably reflects the needs of these learners for specialized information such as requirements for various occupations or appropriate entry-level training available in a community. Further, it may be that younger adults have had less chance to acquire such information through life experience.

Income level of respondents was also related to the need for or availability of information about continuing education. Lack of adequate information was reported both by 57.9% of rural adults with incomes of less than $5,000 per year and 59.7% of adults from the five largest metropolitan areas outside of New York City. In general, a greater proportion of respondents at the lowest income levels than those in higher income groups stated that they did not have adequate information. This perception may indicate the extent to which people at the lower income levels find it difficult to locate appropriate services.

To what extent is lack of information a problem to potential learners? A lack of information was mentioned by 18.3% of the respondents as a barrier to participation in continuing education activities. Of this group, 4.4% stated that it was their chief barrier. The frequency with which adults cited this as a barrier was related to their ages and levels of income. For example, among adults under 25 years of age, 21.8% cited lack of information as a barrier. This proportion also diminished with an increase in the age of the respondents until only 14.7% of respondents age 55 and older considered lack of information to be an obstacle.

Adults at lower income levels were also more likely to name lack of information among their barriers to participation. The proportion identifying this barrier ranged from 20.4% of adults with family incomes of less than $2,000 per year to 13% of adults in the highest family income category, $35,000 or more per year.

TABLE 1

Respondents' Perception of Need for

Continuing Education Information by Age Group

Age Group	Has Enough Information		Not Enough Information		No opinion		Total
	N	%[a]	N	%[a]	N	%[a]	N
Under 25 years	1269	34.0	2002	53.6	356	12.4	3734
25 - 34	1943	39.0	2496	50.1	539	10.8	4978
35 - 44	1806	42.0	2037	47.3	461	10.7	4304
45 - 54	1379	46.7	1241	42.1	330	11.2	2950
55 and older	1078	51.4	741	35.4	277	13.2	2096
Total	7475	41.4[b]	8517	47.2[b]	2070	11.5[b]	18062

Note. Includes only those who responded to both age and information questions.

[a]Based on number of respondents in this age group only.

[b]Based on total number who responded to the questions.

Helpfulness of Counseling

Most of the adults interviewed were positive about the helpfulness of some type of counseling to provide assistance with continuing education courses and services. Over two-thirds (70.0%) of the respondents felt that such a service would help them to some extent (Table 2). However, this perception varied according to the background characteristics and interest area of the person.

Among some subgroups, particularly those at the lower income and educational levels, an even higher proportion of adults felt that counseling would be helpful. Among persons whose main learning interest was job-related, 80% felt that a counseling service would be very or somewhat helpful; this feeling was shared by 80.1% of respondents with family incomes of less than $5,000 per year and 79.1% of adults with less than a high school diploma.

TABLE 2

Respondents' Perception of the

Helpfulness of Continuing Education Counseling

	N	%
Very helpful	6724	37.2
Somewhat helpful	5926	32.8
Not very helpful	2628	14.6
Not at all helpful	2779	15.4
Total	18057	100.0

Perceptions of the helpfulness of counseling also varied according to the learning interest of the individual. During the interview, adults first selected all subjects or topics in which they had any degree of interest; then, from among these subjects, they named their main learning interest. As anticipated, adults whose chief learning interests reflected desire for occupational skills, basic educational skills or high school equivalency were most likely to feel counseling would be helpful to them in getting started in continuing education activities. (Table 3).

TABLE 3

Highest Ranking First-Choice Learning Interests of

Adults Who Perceive Counseling Services as

Very or Somewhat Helpful (N=6724)

	Counseling Very or Somewhat Helpful		
Interest	n	%	Total
High School Equivalency	632	87.8	720
English as a Second Language	107	87.7	122
Nursing	651	87.0	748
Basic Education	203	84.2	241
Social Sciences	237	81.8	296
Total for all interests	6724	70.0	18056

Persons whose chief interest was High School Equivalency ranked first among all interest categories with nearly nine out of ten adults (87.8%) indicating that they believed counseling would be helpful. In contrast, the learning interests chosen by adults who felt counseling would be least helpful were more likely to be avocational or academic in their focus. These included: Humanities (55.4% stating counseling as very or somewhat helpful); History, Government and Current Events (57.2%); Foreign Languages (58.3%); Arts and Crafts (58.9%) and Home Repairs (59.0%). Perhaps the adults choosing these interests are already well-informed about available learning activities or feel competent to attain their learning objectives on their own. However, it should be noted that even among this latter group of interests, more than half of the adults state a positive role for counseling.

Potential Use of Counseling Services

Although adults may hold positive attitudes about the general helpfulness of counseling for continuing education, it is important to know if these adults perceive themselves as likely to avail themselves of services.

When adults were asked how likely they would be to consult a counselor, slightly over one-half of the sample (52.8%) said that they would be somewhat or very likely to consult a counselor about financial assistance for education (see Table 4). This proportion of adults increased to 61.3% when the respondents were asked about the likelihood of consulting a counselor about job-related courses. Only about one in five adults felt that they would not use counseling services for continuing education.

TABLE 4

Likelihood of Respondents Consulting an Adult Education Counselor

	Purpose of Counseling			
	Financial Assistance		Job-Related Courses	
	N	%	N	%
Very likely	5217	28.5	6064	33.7
Somewhat likely	4447	24.3	4969	27.6
Not likely	4653	25.4	3700	20.5
Would not consult	4011	21.9	3277	18.2
Total	18328	100.0	18010	100.0

When the responses were examined by educational and income levels of the respondents, differences were noted. Adults with less than a high school diploma were considerably more likely to say that they would consult a counselor than adults with any post-secondary education. Among persons with less formal education, nearly two-thirds (64.6%) indicated that they would be very or somewhat likely to consult a counselor about financial assistance for continuing education. In contrast, 42.2% of those with some college or a college degree felt that they would utilize counseling services for this reason. Similar results were obtained for the question about use of counselors for job-related educational counseling.

Respondents at lower income levels were also more likely to say that they would consult counselors about job-related continuing education programs. Approximately two out of every five (42.2%) of the interviewees whose family incomes were under $5000 per year said that they would be very likely to consult a counselor; another 29.1% indicated that they would be somewhat likely to consult a counselor for the same reason, bringing the total to 71.3% of the respondents at this lower income level. This is in contrast to the responses of adults with income levels of $20,000 and above, of whom 48.6% would be likely to consult a counselor (24.5% very likely). The responses of adults at other income levels fall in between these two extremes, showing a trend for increasing willingness to use continuing education counseling services as family income decreased.

With respect to age of the respondent, the likelihood of consulting a counselor about either financial assistance or job-related study decreased as the age of the respondent increased. An explanation may be that older citizens have a diminished need for such services since they are more likely to study for personal enjoyment or avocational reasons than to pursue employment-related goals.

Further support for the relationshop of counseling use to strong employment or educational goals is found in the various learning interests of adults. Persons choosing occupational skills or with basic educational needs said that they were most likely to actually consult a counselor. If only the responses of persons who believed they would be very likely to utilize counseling services are examined, adults who wish

to study High School Equivalency, Nursing and Basic Education rank highest on likelihood of seeking both job-related and financial aid counseling. (Table 5). It is especially interesting that adults selecting study for a high school diploma as their prime learning interest view it as related to obtaining or advancing in a job. Hence, over half (51.0%) of those choosing this interest also say they would be very likely to seek counseling for job-related reasons. Similarly, even though preparation for high school equivalency is provided at no cost to the individual in New York State, about the same proportion (50.6%) of adults with this interest would also consult a counselor for financial aid counseling. Perhaps, since these adults are more apt to be at lower income and educational levels, they lack information about the existing state-subsidized opportunities or perceive counseling as assisting them in overcoming pervading financial problems.

TABLE 5

Highest Ranking First-Choice Learning Interests of Adults Very Likely to Use Counseling Services

Interest	Financial Assistance		
	N	%	Total[a]
High School Equiv.	367	50.6	725
Nursing	368	49.1	749
Basic Education	104	42.6	244
Education	177	41.5	427
Social Sciences	118	39.3	300
Total for all interests	5217	28.5	18327

Interest	Job-Related		
	N	%	Total[a]
Nursing	401	54.4	737
High School Equiv.	361	51.0	708
Basic Education	118	49.2	240
Education	192	45.9	418
Psychology, Human Behavior	275	43.6	631
Total for all interests	6064	33.7	18009

[a] Totals based on number responding to questions on interest and likelihood of consulting counselor.

Counseling and Barriers to Learning

If adults are to participate in learning activities, they must not only locate educational opportunities appropriate to their needs but also overcome any individual obstacles preventing or interfering with enrollment. There was particular interest in determining adult perceptions concerning which barriers might be alleviated by counseling.

As part of the interview process, respondents were questioned about the obstacles to their participation in continuing education. A list of twenty-one potential barriers was presented and each respondent was asked first to identify "any of these (reasons) keeping you from taking courses in the subject you are interested in, "and, second, to identify" which one of these is the most important reason keeping you from taking a course.

Less than one-fifth (18.4%) of the sample reported no barriers to their participation in continuing education. Since 66.6% of the respondents had reported some participation in continuing education after completing their formal schooling, it is clear that many of the perceived barriers had not kept these adults from participation. More likely, given the braod range and number of interests cited by adults, while these barriers may have kept some adults from any type of participation in continuing education, other adults feel that they have not been able to participate as much as they would have desired.

Overall, the barrier named most often was "home responsibilities," selected by 30.7% of all adults. Nevertheless, this problem was less likely to be perceived as one in which counselors could be helpful. Among persons for whom this was the main barrier, under a third (30.9%) said counseling would be very helpful in getting started in continuing education activities.

In contrast, adults thought counseling might be more helpful in alleviating other barriers (Table 6). Over half of the adults (51.4%) who said lack of someone to help them get started was their main barrier felt that a counselor would be very helpful in this role. Although for all adults interviewed this barrier ranked only 17th (out of 21 barriers), those selecting it were most positive in their endorsement of counseling. Other adults thought counseling might help

TABLE 6

Highest Ranking Barriers to Participation of Adults who Perceive Counseling as Very Helpful (N=18056)

Most Important Barrier	Counseling Very Helpful N	%	Total
No one to help me get started	95	51.4	185
Cost of tuition	881	47.6	1852
Class in dangerous/hard to get to area	105	46.7	225
Afraid I won't succeed	103	46.4	222
Lack of information	300	44.7	671
Cost of travel	72	44.7	161
Total for all barriers	5217	37.2	18056

them with financial obstacles (tuition, travel), information or personal concerns.

Similar patterns were noted when barriers were examined with reference to the likelihood of adults seeking counseling help. Adults whose most important barrier was cost of tuition were those most likely to consult a counselor for help with financial problems (Table 7). With respect to counseling for job-related reasons, adults who felt there was no one to help them get started were also very likely to use counseling services for this purpose. As before, the barriers for which these adult learners would seek counseling were not generally those which were most frequently chosen by the total sample population. Only "cost of tuition" ranked among the top five barriers, either as a general barrier or most important barrier for adults.

TABLE 7

Highest Ranking Barriers to Participation of Adults
Very Likely to Consult Counselors

Most Important Barrier	Financial Aid N	Financial Aid %	Total	Most Important Barrier	Job-Related N	Job-Related %	Total
Cost of tuition	858	45.7	1879	No one to help me get started	84	46.7	180
No one to help me get started	74	39.6	187	Cost of tuition	813	44.2	1841
Need for child care	224	37.2	602	Need for child care	245	41.9	585
Lack of information	252	36.8	684	Class full before registration	112	41.9	267
Afraid I won't do well	79	36.4	217	Afraid I won't do well	90	40.7	221
Total for all barriers	5217	28.5	18327	Total for sample	6064	33.7	18009

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions from the research on adults' perceptions of their information and counseling needs suggest that the potential learners differ in their perceived needs according to their various personal characteristics and motives for participation in learning activities. In general, persons who viewed continuing education as a means of obtaining or advancing in a job, the young, the economically disadvantaged and those who wished to acquire basic educational skills saw themselves both as needing information and likely to use available counseling services. Thus, those individuals who might be described as educationally or economically disadvantaged showed a recognition of their problems and a willingness to seek assistance in overcoming them.

The identification of the characteristics of adults who perceive themselves as needing and using counseling bear out results obtained in earlier landmark research on adult learning needs and participation in educational activities. Findings from this research (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965) indicated that greater knowledge and information about continuing education resources is related to membership in higher educational and socio-economic levels. These findings do not appear to have changed appreciably over the past decade in spite of the dramatic increase in continuing education participation. In the present study, the adults interviewed who had the lowest incomes and educational attainment were also those most likely to perceive lack of information as interfering with participation. Consideration of the special needs of these potential learners raises questions about the effectiveness of present efforts to disseminate information about learning activities and the adequacy of existing counseling or support services for adults. Additional efforts might be directed to further identifying and discriminating among strategies which could reach special target groups of adults.

Targeting support services to the needs of these special populations, while desirable, raises other issues which must be resolved. Providing the special information and counseling services desired by potential adult learners or expanding existing services may result in increased expense to institutions or agencies. This is a particularly critical problem since although some state and federal funds are available to provide

continuing education services for special groups, the present continuing education system in New York State is largely self-supporting. Since cost of tuition is already one of the most highly ranked barriers to participation for adult groups and the top-ranked barrier for lower income adults, increases in the costs of participating in learning activities or obtaining services may have adverse effects upon enrollments. Special attention to the problem of financing continuing education is required in order to find solutions which can meet the diverse needs of adult students.

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Appendix A

SUBJECTS OF INTEREST

1. High School equivalency preparation (G.E.D.)
2. Citizenship, English as a second language
3. Basic Education such as reading, writing and arithmetic skills
4. Home Repairs
5. Building Trades such as plumbing, electrical work, masonry and carpentry
6. Industrial Trades and Technical Skills such as welding, tool and die making, graphic arts, auto mechanics, TV repair, drafting
7. Protective Services such as fire, police, security guard
8. Service Occupations such as hairdressing, chef training
9. Business Skills such as typing, accounting, bookkeeping
10. Computer Science such as data processing, programming
11. Investment such as money management, insurance, savings plans
12. Management Skills such as business, administration, hotel management
13. Sales and Advertising such as real estate, public relations
14. Travel such as planning trips to other countries, travel agent
15. Arts and Crafts such as painting, photography, weaving, pottery and woodworking
16. Performing Arts such as music, drama, dance
17. Health and Safety such as first-aid, baby care, water safety
18. Occult Sciences such as astrology, ESP, magic
19. Driving, Flight Training: car, truck, heavy equipment, plane
20. Gardening such as growing vegetables, flowers
21. Home Decorating such as interior design, flower arranging
22. Sewing including design and fashion
23. Cooking including food preservation and nutrition
24. Parent Education: family relationships, family planning, child development
25. Planning for your retirement
26. Consumer Education such as buying, credit
27. Architecture
28. Engineering: civil, electrical, mechanical
29. Education: teacher training, administration, curriculum planning, guidance
30. Law including law for everyday living, legal rights
31. Nursing
32. Agriculture: farming, such as dairy, orchard, poultry, crops, animal science
33. Religion
34. History, Government, Current Events
35. Languages such as French, German, Spanish, Chinese
36. Science and Math: biology, chemistry, algebra, geology, etc.
37. Psychology: psychology for everyday living, counseling, human behavior
38. Social Sciences: sociology, social work, archeology, anthropology
39. Humanities such as philosophy, great books, art and music appreciation
40. Nature Study: ecology, conservation, ornithology
41. Physical Fitness: exercises, self-defense, body-movement
42. Sports and Games such as golf, bridge, swimming, boating
43. Other interest
44. No learning interest at this time
45. No answer

APPENDIX B

Barriers to Learning

1. Classes you want aren't scheduled when you can attend
2. Classes given in an area that is dangerous or hard to get to
3. Classes are too far away or you have no way to get there
4. Classes are not given in your subject of interest
5. Cost of tuition
6. Cost of books, materials or equipment
7. Cost of new clothes or uniforms
8. Need for baby-sitter or other child care
9. Cost of travel to classes
10. Amount of time required to complete program
11. Job responsibilities
12. Home and family responsibilities; other activities or responsibilities
13. Feel you are too old
14. Nobody you know goes to classes
15. Afraid you won't do well
16. Not enough information on classes available
17. Class assignments or homework would take too much time
18. Would take time away from earning money
19. No one to help you get started
20. Class filled before you could register
21. Physical disability or poor health